



The Sacramento Bee

Pact gives a reprieve to Valley's levee trees

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Levee managers in the Central Valley are being told to holster their chain saws following a deal announced Friday to stay the execution of thousands of trees on area riverbanks.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has agreed not to enforce the vegetation component of its levee maintenance rules while a new policy is developed. The decision grants a reprieve to riverbank trees and their supporters throughout the Central Valley.

"What a sad place this would be without those trees," said Sacramento Mayor Heather Fargo, who chairs the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency. "I am pleased that by really looking at the science and listening to experts we are on the way to policies much more appropriate to Sacramento. We're back on the right track now."

For decades, the Army Corps allowed trees and large shrubs on Central Valley levees -- and even encouraged planting more. They did so in cooperation with wildlife agencies because there is almost no other riverbank habitat left.

Then, after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, the corps took a more rigid stance and enforced its national vegetation policy in California for the first time. That policy allows no plants larger than 2 inches in diameter on levees.

As a result, 32 Central Valley levee districts learned in January that they had failed a maintenance inspection, largely because of excessive vegetation. Many more, including urban Sacramento levees, were likely to fail another round of inspections this fall. The potential consequences of a failed inspection include losing access to federal levee rebuilding funds after a flood, and decertification by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Many local levee districts objected because of the expense required to clear vegetation. In many cases, levees would have to be rebuilt after removing tree roots. Residents feared loss of shade, scenery and habitat.

In hopes of settling the dispute, the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency held a symposium on levee vegetation last month. Experts presented evidence that trees may actually strengthen



HEATHER FARGO "We're back on the right track now," the mayor said of the pact.

levees by binding soil layers together. There was little evidence that trees contribute to levee failure.

"It's the Fish and Wildlife Service position that, in many cases, vegetation is neutral or beneficial to levee integrity," Paul Henson, the federal agency's assistant regional director, said Friday.

The Bee first reported Sept. 1 that the Army Corps had dropped a March 30, 2008, compliance deadline for levee districts already warned about vegetation. In the new agreement, the corps goes further, promising to use "best available science" in concert with other agencies to craft a policy that meets local needs. Until that policy is finalized, levee districts will not be punished for excessive vegetation in upcoming inspections.

The March deadline, however, remains in place for other maintenance problems, such as levee erosion or encroachment by structures. And the new policy will probably still require some trees to be removed if they clearly threaten levee stability.

"Without compromising public safety, our intent is to develop solutions that take into account the concerns of science and natural resources," said Col. Tom Chapman, Sacramento district commander at the Army Corps.

Friday's agreement arose from a meeting organized by the California Reclamation Board. It was endorsed by the board, SAFCA, Army Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, local levee districts, and the state Water Resources and Fish and Game departments.

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